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Schot, Suzanne

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Book Reviews

Adam Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015, 278 pp., £16.99/€22.99 paperback)

After a mass atrocity, the bodies of the dead are left in the hands of forensic scientists to identify and repatriate. While identification of the dead remains an important aspect of this work, tribunals and courts also demand evidence to prosecute those responsible. Alongside this process stand the relatives of the victims: those who have lost a loved one. It is the interplay between the aforementioned that forms the basis of this book, addressing those parties involved in the process of 'digging for the disappeared'.

Adam Rosenblatt's experience working at Physicians for Human Rights and the Human Rights Centre at the University of Chile can be regarded as the golden thread running throughout the book. Additionally, his personal experience with the dead and traditions surrounding burial are brought to the reader in the Preface, which immediately encourage the consideration of one's own conception of handling, mourning and burying human remains. As these themes reappear throughout the book, the reader is enriched with different perspectives that force comparison with his or her own experiences.

In his own words, 'the book is focussed specifically on the exhumation of mass graves containing the victims of human rights violations, and accompanying efforts to document those violations, identify and reassemble dead bodies and repatriate them to their families or others who mourn them' (Introduction). In order to address all the stakeholders following a mass atrocity, Rosenblatt splits the book into two parts. The first examines 'The politics of mass graves'. Here, two chapters have been included: 'The stakeholders in international forensic investigations' and 'The politics of grief'. The thorniest problems addressed in this part include, for example, the time pressure sometimes placed upon forensic investigators to provide tribunals with the evidence they need rather than identifying the victims for the relatives left behind, as well as the different interpretations on the role of exhumations with regards to Argentina's disappeared. The second part focuses on 'The philosophy of mass graves', and includes the chapters 'Forensics of the sacred', 'Dead to rights' and 'Caring for the dead'. These provide valuable insights into the status of the dead in relation to religion, as well as questioning whether the dead indeed have rights in relation to the law and, if so, whether such rights should be subjected to limitations.

Intertwined throughout the book are other important aspects that critically discuss the conceptions of forensic scientists themselves in relation to the depicted situations. Rosenblatt lets them explain the problems they encounter while working with the dead. He uses memoirs and biographies as well as interviews conducted with forensic scientists. In addition, Rosenblatt has not constrained himself to addressing a limited number of atrocities, but rather opens up the book to address all those atrocities that have occurred throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This enriches the text, as the reader is supplemented with valuable insights into a variety of human rights violations, which have generated in mass fatalities, and have thus triggered the intervention of forensics.



Watching the news or reading the newspaper makes us aware of the mass atrocities and natural disasters that occur on a regular basis. All in all, Adam Rosenblatt takes the reader beyond those headlines and presents a wider view of the occurrence of a disaster: the disaster of losing a loved one in a spill of a mass atrocity. While the story usually ends once the newspapers have been read, those left behind in the wake of loss are subjected to an unimaginable amount of grief. In the midst of all this operate those people one hopes will be able to identify a loved one, the one who disappeared. These forensic scientists work with the dead amongst them while also assisting the needs of the living: the surviving next of kin and the tribunals responsible for prosecution. In his book, Rosenblatt brings to light the 'balance of interests' encountered by forensic scientists, hereby offering the reader an overall view of mass atrocities and their aftermath. For this reason, the book advances an understanding of the entire picture surrounding mass atrocities and the resulting dead.

Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity is recommended to all those interested in the forensic scientific aftermath of mass fatalities as a result of human rights violations, including to those who want to be challenged with questions that confront the core status of the living and the dead.

Suzanne Leontine Schot, University of Groningen